United Nations E/2016/NGO/72

Economic and Social Council

Distr.: General
24 May 2016

Original: English

2016 session
24 July 2015-27 July 2016
Agenda item 5
High-level segment

Statement submitted by Universal Esperanto Association, a non-governmental organization in consultative status with the Economic and Social Council*

The Secretary-General has received the following statement, which is being circulated in accordance with paragraphs 30 and 31 of Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

* The present statement is issued without formal editing.

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Statement

The SDGs must embrace civil society.

"This 2030 agenda is for everyone everywhere," remarked Helen Clark, United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) Administrator and former New Zealand Prime Minister. The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), added Erna Solberg, Prime Minister of Norway, constitute "the largest development dialogue the world has ever seen." "It is important to listen to the voices of the people," said Phan Binh Minh, Deputy Prime Minister of the Socialist Republic of Viet Nam. Success depends not only on governments but also on those the governments serve — ordinary citizens holding governments accountable, helping where governments cannot.

The SDGs must involve listening as well as talking.

So the effort should involve everyone — in multilingual dialogue involving listening to the voices of the people rather than dictating solutions in the one-sided, top-down development process previously all too common in development circles.

The language dimension is largely absent from the SDGs.

While the talk is of dialogue, this does not translate into awareness of language both as process and as substance. The dimension of language is barely mentioned, and not at all in the seventeen SDGs themselves. "Dialogue" is conducted overwhelmingly in English, and to a lesser degree other major languages. Yet the people at whom the goals are directed — particularly goals addressing poverty, education, and literacy — often do not speak the languages of the policymakers. Some belong to language minorities with little voice in their own countries, and none in the wider world. "Use of local languages is inseparable from participatory development. Local people will not own development until they can discuss it among themselves and with outsiders without the barrier of someone else's language," says one language policy expert. Another adds: "International development exists inside language; we do not have international development without language."

Language lies at the very core of human communication.

Canadian scholar Mark Fettes analyzed the eighteen "think pieces" that the UN System Task Team published on the SDGs. Language appeared only four times in all eighteen documents, and then only linked with "indicators of diversity, inequality or discrimination," never as a factor in its own right. Yet language choice and language use have direct impact on the efficacy of political engagement, the effectiveness of education, legal processes, human rights. Language is often used to discriminate and disempower. It seems odd that people of goodwill should accord so little attention to the linguistic processes at the core of human communication.

The UN must pay greater attention to language in development.

Our Association is interested not only in promoting the International Language Esperanto but also in eliminating all forms of discrimination, including linguistic discrimination, and advancing all basic human rights, including linguistic rights. One of only a few NGOs primarily concerned with language issues, it is pursuing a

two-part strategy: first, using its worldwide network of Esperanto speakers to advance the SDGs, encouraging intervention with governments in their support; second, urging the United Nations to pay greater attention to language issues and recognize that effective communication and inclusive language policies go together.